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Diminishing graduate student-teacher power dynamics through care and vulnerability

Critical Commentary

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Abstract

In this critical reflection, we discuss the concepts of ‘care’ (hooks, 1994) and ‘vulnerability’ (Cano Abadía, 2021) as they relate to the student-teacher power dynamics instructors often face – consciously or not – in graduate-level post-secondary contexts. We suggest that, when practiced together, care and vulnerability offer ways to diminish power imbalances between instructors and students.

Introduction

The goal of diminishing student-teacher power dynamics in the classroom has long captured the attention of educators. For example, Freire's (1970/2005) encouragement of "education as the practice of freedom" (p. 81) rather than domination depended on teachers and students becoming 'teacher students' and 'student teachers' who were "jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 80). However, post-secondary graduate education still largely occurs within deeply hierarchical and colonial institutions, where significant power dynamics between instructors/supervisors and graduate students are entrenched within the academic culture and can impact transformative learning goals. In practical terms, diminishing graduate student-teacher power dynamics is challenging.

In this critical reflection, we explore care and vulnerability as two key concepts which may help reduce uneven power dynamics between instructors and graduate students. We suggest that by exploring our vulnerabilities and sharing them in a caring way, we may diminish (however slightly) the metaphorical walls between ourselves and the graduate students we supervise and teach.

Our shared pedagogical approach

We two co-authors both came to Canada as international graduate student women (from Tajikistan and USA) to study the social sciences. While teaching in various positions over the years, we unsurprisingly experienced student-teacher power dynamics differently based on our individual positionalities, which are quite different (e.g., our race, sexuality, language, religion, nationality). In highly contextual and fluid ways, we held power to differing degrees in relation to the highly heterogeneous classes of graduate students that we taught.

Like hooks (1994), both of our pedagogical approaches emerged from the “interplay of anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies” (p. 10), and we are intentional in our attempts to transgress boundaries in our classrooms. We value the ideals of partnership, dialogue (Freire, 1970/2005), and the co-construction of knowledge, while also challenging the hierarchical traditional notion that “only the professor is responsible for classroom dynamics” (hooks, 1994, p. 8). Instead, for us, we see learning as a co-constructed, collective experience which blossoms best in safe, egalitarian spaces. We challenge the idea that students are “empty vessels to be filled,” and view the traditional ‘banking’ model of education as a method of domination (Freire 1970, p. 79). Instead, we aim to see each individual holistically and as complex beings.

However, truly enacting this vision can a difficult task. We are thus continuously experimenting with techniques to create safe, relational spaces in classrooms, virtual environments, our offices, and even across email and other forms of communication. Like Kumsa (2016), we do not want to nurture among students “hearts hard as rocks,” but rather focus on “love and caring” as a political act which can contribute to co-constructing reflexive learning (p. 605). We also seek to create teaching environments in which students can feel safe to become themselves (Horton et al., 1990), embrace learning, and equally participate in the collective co-construction of teaching and learning.

To do so, we explored centering our practices around the concept of ‘care’ (hooks, 1994), as without care, we cannot create the safe space where learning is co-constructed. However, we believe that ‘care’ needs to be practiced together with ‘vulnerability’ (Cano Abadia, 2021). Based on our teaching experience, we suggest that the practice of these two concepts together can help instructors diminish complex power imbalances in the classroom and create a safer

space for learning. This space also allows for openness and authenticity where the whole person is seen and heard.

Defining the concepts of ‘care’ and ‘vulnerability’

For many, the concept of care is fundamental to education (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016) and, in particular, critical pedagogical relationships. As Noddings argued, “to care and be cared for are fundamental human needs” (1992, p. xi); hence, “the maintenance and enhancement of caring [is] the primary aim of education” (Noddings, 1984, p. 174). Noddings (1984) defined care in the context of education as the willingness to “really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey” (p. 15). We share Noddings’ focus on an approach to care which is “rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” (1984, p. 2), and, like hooks, we strive “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students [which] is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks, 1994, p. 13).

Although care is central to education, when practiced alone, it does not necessarily diminish power imbalances and can, in some cases, exacerbate them. Care is usually practiced *outwards* (i.e., a teacher *cares for* a student). While we do not deny the value of caring practices – we, in fact, embrace them – we nevertheless invite deeper reflexivity and consideration about the unintentional implications of care. When not practiced attentively or reflectively, care can be paternalistic, saviouristic, and/or create dependency, all of which can reinforce an uneven power dynamic between the care-giver and the care-receiver.

For this reason, we suggest that care should be practiced alongside vulnerability. Tronto (2017) contended that all humans are vulnerable at some point in their lives, a reality which

requires us to rely on others for care and support at least sometimes. Relatedly, Loveless et al. (2016) suggested that “shared humanity makes us all vulnerable, and our vulnerabilities enable us to bond with one another in ways that can strengthen democratic engagement” (p.15). Rather than focus on vulnerability’s negative connotations, i.e., as “susceptibility to being harmed,” we follow Cano Abadía’s reference to “the very condition of possibility of being affected; a constitutive openness that is related to our relationality and exposability” (2021, p. 105).

We understand vulnerability as a practice focused *inward* when an instructor is working through, and exposing, their own vulnerabilities. This process highlights the wholeness of a person, beyond simply showing oneself as a teacher or student. In this way, modelling vulnerability can be an expression of care which creates stronger and safer learning environments.

We understand that vulnerability puts us at risk; however, it is precisely this risk, which is what makes relationships authentic, which in turn minimizes rigid power dynamics in the classrooms. As hooks (1994) suggested, “any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process...most professors must practise being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit” (p. 21). Indeed, together with hooks (1994), we also believe so. When practiced together, we believe care and vulnerability can contribute to safer, more authentic, and more egalitarian educational relationships.

As Cano Abadia (2021) contends, embracing vulnerability in the classroom is, again, not an easy task; it takes courage, as “it invites us to open ourselves to share with others” (p.113). However, in creating a care-*full* environment, we learn how to take care of each other in the moments of vulnerability. In this open, ‘vulnerable care space,’ we create a more equitable space

where power imbalances are blurred and diminished. By modelling vulnerability ourselves, we normalise it and empower students to accept and embrace their own vulnerabilities. As educators, we thus suggest care-fully exploring our vulnerabilities in order to practice teaching which contributes to diminishing the walls between the graduate students and teachers.

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